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ABSTRACT

Designed to provide a scale for assessing the quality of short expository essays, this material includes a group of six expository essays about 250-300 words in length arranged in order of quality. Each essay is followed by critical comments and a general discussion of the characteristics of essays at that level of quality. No validity or reliability data are reported, but thirty-seven of forty college students in advanced composition courses were able to arrange the six essays in the order established in the scale. [This document is one of those reviewed in The Research Instruments Project (TRIP) monograph "Measures for Research and Evaluation in the English Language Arts" to be published by the Committee on Research of the National Council of Teachers of English in cooperation with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills. A TRIP review which precedes the document lists its category (Writing), title, author, date, and age range (high school), and describes the instrument's purpose and physical characteristics.] (RB)

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NCTE Committee on Research

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Category: Writing

Title: A Scale for Evaluation of High School Student Essays

Authors: Joint Subcommittee on Composition, California Association of Teachers of English

Age Range: High School

Description of Instrument:

Purpose: To provide a scale for the assessment of the quality of short expository essays.

Date of Construction: 1960

Physical Description: The scale is a group of six expository essays about 250-300 words in length arranged in order of quality. Each essay is followed by critical comments and a general discussion of the characteristics of essays at that level of quality.

The scale was developed from a random sample of 561 essays from a California state-wide sampling of the writing of high school students.

Validity, Reliability, and Normative Data:

No validity or reliability data are reported; however, thirty-seven of forty college students in advanced composition courses were able to arrange the six essays in the order established for the scale.

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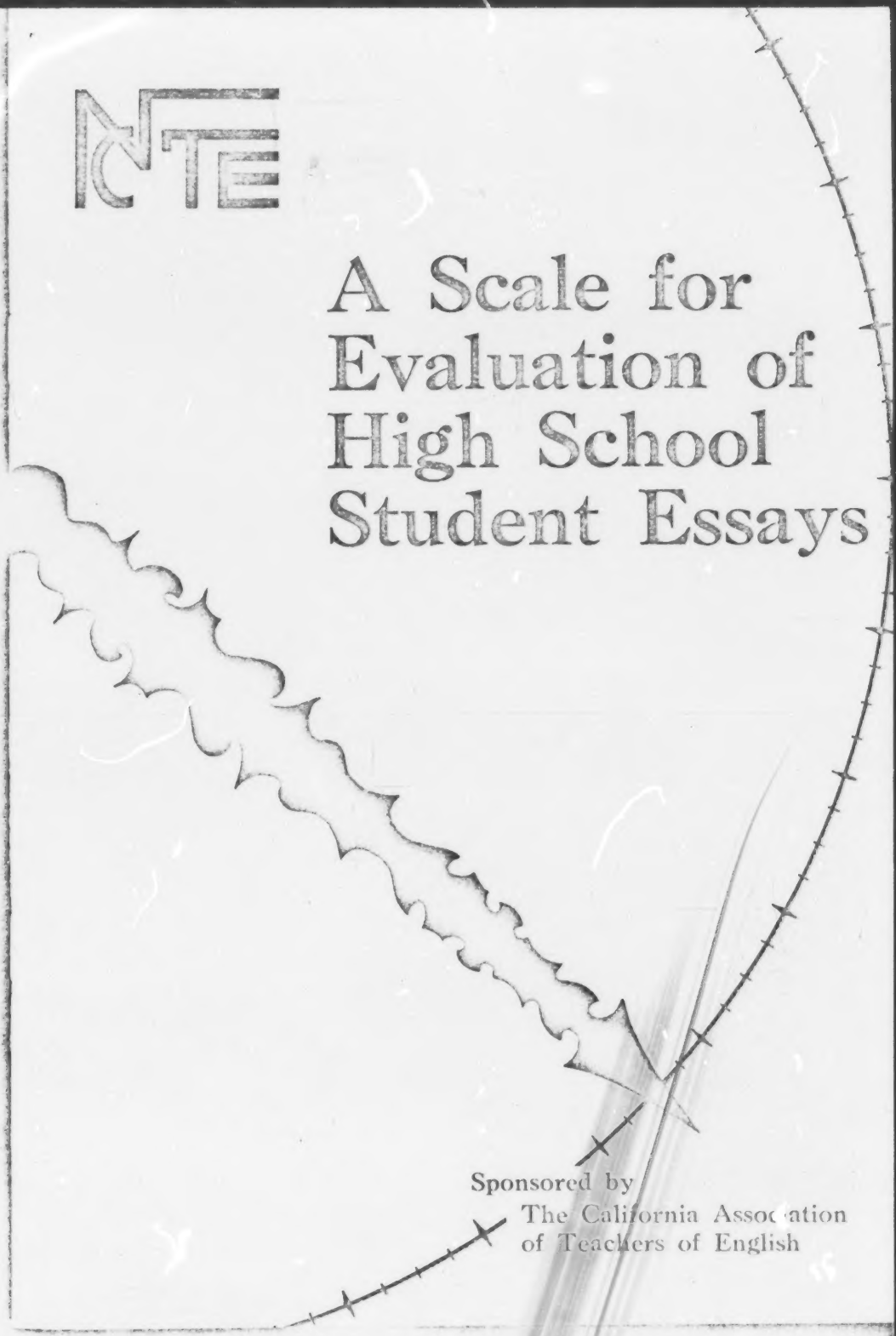

A Scale for Evaluation of High School Student Essays

Sponsored by
The California Association
of Teachers of English

Prepared for the
California State
Articulation
Conference

under the direc-
tion of the
Joint Subcommittee
on Composition

A SCALE FOR EVALUATION OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT ESSAYS

by

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION 3

Section I: *BACKGROUNDS* 5

Section II: *PROCEDURES* 7

Section III: *FINDINGS* 9

Section IV: *USE OF THE ESSAY SCALE* 11

Section V: *THE EVALUATION OF ESSAYS* 13

Section VI: *SYMBOLS USED IN THE CORRECTION OF ESSAYS* 14

Section VII: *THE ESSAY SCALE* 15

Section VIII: *OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS* 31

SECTION I

BACKGROUNDS

The material presented here is the result of a study begun in 1957 of the writing ability of California high school seniors. It is part of a larger project of the State Articulation Conference Joint Subcommittee on Composition, which includes in its scope the task of defining acceptable standards of student composition at several academic levels. It is the responsibility of the Joint Subcommittee, through the exchange of information and ideas, to encourage and facilitate the establishment of comparable and clearly defined standards of achievement and competence in English composition throughout the public educational institutions of the state.

The practical objective of this study has been to develop a scale, based upon clearly defined criteria of good writing, which can be of value to the high school English teacher. And since the development of proper habits of expression in writing should be the concern of every school official and teacher, it is hoped that this scale will find general acceptance and use. It should be made clear, however, that the Joint Subcommittee does not consider itself authorized to compete with or to operate in conflict with the duly established agencies for determining policies or requirements. Nor is the scale presented here to be construed as anything more than a sincere attempt to describe and define the levels of proficiency in student writing evaluated on the basis of established criteria and developed into a scale of graded essays.

The committee responsible for this work consisted of Dr. N. Field Winn, Chico State College, chairman; Mr. Pat Nail, Woodside High School; Mr. Rodney Fitch, Coalinga Junior College; Mr. Phil S. Grant, University of California; and Mr. John Halverson, also of the University. This study group was appointed in 1956 by the Articulation Conference Joint Subcommittee on English Composition, of which Dean Hector Lee of Chico State College was chairman.

Successful completion of the project was made possible by the steady encouragement, guidance, and specific aid in many ways given by the officers of the Joint Subcommittee: Dr. Grace Bird, Associate Director of the Office of Relations with Schools for the University of California; Professor James Lynch of the Department of English, University of California at Berkeley, and secretary of the Joint Subcommittee; Mr. Alfred Livingston, then Director of Coalinga Junior College and vice-chairman of the Joint Subcommittee; and Dean Lee, chairman.

Some financial assistance was provided by the University of California at the personal request of President Robert Gordon Sproul, financial and

personnel assistance by the State Department of Education through its Division of State Colleges and Teacher Education and its Bureau of Secondary Education. Printing costs have been paid by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Many persons have shared in this study and deserve particular thanks. The California State Articulation Conference, which includes membership from the University of California, the state colleges, the junior colleges, and the secondary schools, endorsed the study. Consultations were held with the members of the Joint Subcommittee: the officers mentioned above, together with Glenn Beeman, Stephen Epler, Paul Gordon, Byron Guyer, William Harless, Edgar Lazier, J. B. Ramsey, Vern W. Robinson, Howard Snyder, Augusta Treister, and Richard Worthen.

The State Department of Education contributed through the assistance of James B. Enochs, Frank Lindsay, Eugene Mushlitz, Everett O'Rourke, Jon Peters, and J. Burton Vasche. High school and state college teachers of English who also participated were Harlen Adams, Alan Amend, Harold Armstrong, Ellen Bennett, Milton Black, Tom Blewett, Arthur J. Broderson, Wilma Carlson, James D. Collins, Ruth Dodds, Sabra Firestein, Eugene Geidt, Antonette Heaney, Charles Higby, Dudley Igo, Lois Lehman, Florence Lillibridge, Vivian Melton, Hilda Moeller, Arnold Needham, Philip Nordhus, Jesse W. Pinion, Helen Stinnett, Pat Sullivan, Jere Veilleux, Mary Washington, Allie Mae Ward, and Olive Young.

The members of the Articulation Conference and its Joint Subcommittee believe that student writing must be improved at all academic levels and that much improvement can be accomplished through studies such as this together with the sincere cooperation of all members of the teaching profession.

SECTION II

PROCEDURES

During the spring of 1957 the Subcommittee on Composition, working under the direction of the State Articulation Conference, invited every California public high school teacher of senior classes in English to participate in a study of competence in student composition.[1] Instructions to teachers stipulated that expository essays be written in the classroom without aids in response to any of ten questions carefully chosen to allow expression of a wide variety of interests. The Subcommittee felt that expository writing best illustrated the practical problems of composition. Employing their usual standards, teachers were then to select and send to the Subcommittee a "best," a "most clearly average," and a "worst" paper for every one hundred or fraction of one hundred seniors given the assignment.

In response to this request the Subcommittee received 1788 essays representing 207 schools, or about 39 per cent of the public high schools in the state. Contributing schools were of all sizes and were widely distributed geographically. Of course it is impossible to determine how many papers the high school teachers read in their efforts to select appropriate samples, but obviously the essays received by the Subcommittee represent only a very small portion of those initially screened at the high school level.

With very limited funds available, the Subcommittee found it impossible to examine in detail every one of the 1788 essays submitted and therefore employed a statistically valid technique of random sampling in determining which papers should receive detailed consideration.[2]

In preparation for the work of the Subcommittee, ten experienced readers at the University of California, using standard criteria, read and screened 561 essays—almost one-third of those submitted—and placed them in groups representing eight levels of competence. The number of "best," "average," and "worst" papers read was approximately proportionate to the number submitted in each category. It should be noted, however, that despite instructions to participating teachers, the Subcommittee received relatively few "worst" papers. After the papers had been read and graded from one to eight, the readers selected examples which they believed typical of each of the eight levels. Eventually a group of thirty-seven essays was selected to illustrate variations in quality.

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[1]Continuation schools, adult schools, evening schools, and certain other schools were not included in the study.

[2]Dr. David D. Blackwell, Professor of Statistics at the University of California, advised the Subcommittee on statistical procedures.

Meanwhile, the Subcommittee screened the remaining 1227 essays in an effort to find additional papers which might illustrate effectively the top and bottom levels of competence. One paper which the Subcommittee considered excellent in many respects was discarded later because consulting high school teachers disagreed about its quality. The worst paper discovered was likewise discarded because it seemed pointless to consider an otherwise blank page upon which the teacher had written with simple eloquence, "The kid can't write."

Having prepared an outline of criteria used by the readers for the evaluation of essays, the Subcommittee made a careful and critical examination of the thirty-seven essays. After much deliberation reflecting no substantial disagreement about the quality of composition represented but some uncertainty about which essays best illustrated the various levels of competence, the Subcommittee selected eight papers for inclusion in a tentative essay scale. These papers and the evaluation outline were duplicated and sent to seventeen cooperating high school teachers, six college instructors, and twenty-three students in a college course in advanced composition with the request that the essays be arranged in order of quality. Although the resulting arrangements were remarkably uniform, disagreement about the placement of two essays seemed to indicate that gradations in quality within the eight-point scale were not always clearly differentiated. Hence, the Subcommittee removed the two essays to produce the present scale of six. Forty students in college courses in advanced composition examined the six-point scale, and arrangements made by thirty-seven corresponded exactly with the arrangement in the present scale.

Finally, the Subcommittee prepared a sheet of standard symbols used in the correction of student papers, carefully marked the six essays in the scale, and appended to each a pertinent critical comment. A small group of high school teachers then examined the report of the Subcommittee and submitted their reactions. In so far as possible, suggestions made by these teachers have been incorporated into the OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS which conclude this publication.

SECTION III

FINDINGS

As indicated in the discussion of procedures which resulted in the essay scale, the chief work of the Subcommittee was the intensive scrutiny of a small number of carefully selected samples of student composition. Such an endeavor obviously does not invite statistical analysis. The Subcommittee recognizes that qualitative evaluations differ somewhat from one teacher to another, and that the size and quality of the class determine to a large extent the meaning of "best," "average," and "worst." Nevertheless, since the total number of papers placed in appropriate levels of competence was rather extensive, some tentative but significant conclusions can be drawn concerning the writing ability of seniors in California high schools.

The chart below shows how the 561 essays selected by random sampling and considered by the Subcommittee are distributed over the present six-point scale.

Teacher Evaluations

		"Best"	"Average"	"Worst"
Scale	1	6	0	0
	2	35	2	0
	3	134	79	1
	4	33	83	14
	5	16	53	10
	6	4	21	70
	Total	228	238	95*

*The reader is reminded that although there must be a "worst" paper in every set of compositions submitted, teachers did not identify "best," "average," and "worst" essays in equal proportions.

Relatively few essays have been placed at the top because the sampling simply did not reveal many high quality papers. The first essay in the final six-point scale does not make exaggerated demands for precision. It would seem, therefore, that the top level on the scale is a realistic goal, especially for high school students in college preparatory classes.

The largest number of essays which teachers labeled "best" will be found tabulated in the chart at the third level of quality. After a study of university placement examinations in English and a consultation with examining officials, the Subcommittee determined that essays at this level would ordinarily meet university requirements for placement of a student

in a standard freshman composition course, whereas essays at the fourth level probably would not. The majority of "best" papers would thus meet minimal requirements for successful university work in composition, but 53 of the 228, or 23 per cent, very likely would prove inadequate.

A further examination of the chart indicates that eighty-one of the 238 papers designated "average" would appear on the composition scale at the third level or higher. Interpreting these figures in terms of standards in university placement examinations, the Subcommittee concludes that 34 per cent of the essays in the "average" group would pass, and 66 per cent would fail. The median paper in this group clearly belongs at the fourth level. It seems reasonable to extend this conclusion, and in view of the thousands of essays initially screened by the high school teachers and the valid sampling made by the Subcommittee, to state that given an hour of class time, the average student in senior classes in composition in the high schools of California is capable of writing similar in overall quality to the fourth essay in the scale. Such a student, it should be emphasized, might very well be required to do remedial work in English if he continues his education at the university level.

The "worst" papers tabulated on the chart, of course, are generally very poor. One school's "worst" paper, however, compares favorably with the median of the "best" papers, and fourteen other essays rank with the median of "average" papers. But seventy of the ninety-five samples examined (74 per cent) are placed at the sixth level, the very bottom of the scale. The median of "worst" papers falls at the sixth level.

In view of the foregoing analysis, the Subcommittee wishes to point out two facts which seem to be well documented by this study. First, although some of the "best" writing of seniors in California high schools is of good quality, most of it is definitely mediocre in terms of the criteria established by the Subcommittee. Second, "average" writing, taken as a whole, does not represent satisfactory achievement for seniors in high school composition, when "satisfactory" is thought of in relation to probable success in college writing courses.

SECTION IV

USE OF THE ESSAY SCALE

The following essay scale consists of an outline of criteria for the evaluation of compositions, a list of symbols used in the scale essays representing six levels of quality, and pertinent critical comments.

The evaluation outline, which is the basis upon which the essays in the scale were judged, is necessarily short and obviously very general. It is intended simply as a guide, a reminder of the qualities which distinguish superior composition. In preparing such a guide the Subcommittee found it impossible to define or to give examples of all terms employed, for to do so would entail the writing of a complete textbook on composition. Thus the teacher who attempts to use the outline in the evaluation of sudent papers must still decide, for example, whether ideas under consideration are relevant and well developed and whether vocabulary is accurate; for clearly enough, no definite answers to these questions can be given. The Subcommittee suggests, however, that teachers who keep the outline in mind as they study the scaled essays and critical comments will find some assistance with these problems.

The symbols used in the scale are generally markings familiar to every trained teacher of English. They have been identified on page 14, and they may be found fully discussed in standard handbooks of composition.

The six essays in the scale are reproduced word for word and error for error, just as the students wrote them, and arranged in order of quality from best to worst. The Subcommittee, however, has made certain additions within the body of each selection: the sentences have been numbered to facilitate the observation of references made in the critical comments that follow, and italics and brackets have been added to direct attention to certain word groups commented on in the marginalia. (No student writer used either brackets or italics in his essay.) Proofreader's markings in the margins refer to errors near the margins in which the notations appear. Other marginal entries are self-explanatory. The Subcommittee has attempted to mark the essays closely without being puristic. It should be noted, however, that markings are for the teacher's information; they would not necessarily be the same on essays which are to be returned to students. A few minor errors have been intentionally overlooked.

The critical comment accompanying each essay is an attempt to employ the general criteria of the evaluation outline in judging the quality of composition represented. It does not attempt to treat every item in the outline, for it seems pointless to discuss effective sentence structure, for example, in connection with a paper which illustrates a fundamental ignorance of the English language. Nevertheless, each critical comment seeks to

illuminate the characteristic excellence and inadequacy of the paper under consideration, and in appropriate context, to offer some specific examples. Following each critical comment is a summary of qualities which may be expected in other essays at the same level.

The application of the essay scale, of course, will require judgment and some knowledge of composition. It is not a magic formula for the instructor who lacks adequate background in English, nor will it prove useful in the hands of a very weak student. The entire study was undertaken primarily for teachers, not for students. Nevertheless, adequate discussion of the scale and carefully guided instruction in its use should prepare the more conscientious high school seniors to employ it profitably in the evaluation of their own compositions.

The majority of teachers, however, will find the scale useful as a basis for departmental discussions of composition standards and grading policies, and the individual teacher may use it to determine areas of instruction requiring emphasis and to guide him in the marking of student papers. If the essays in the scale are used as a guide in grading, the teacher should remember that a good essay need not be without errors. Essay I in the scale has more errors noted than either Essay II or III; however, the more extensive development of the thought in Essay I and the manner in which it meets the standards of the evaluation outline result in a paper of better overall quality than either Essay II or III. Obviously some errors detract more from effectiveness than do others; for example, fragments, comma splices, faulty agreement of subject and verb, faulty pronoun reference, absence of proper transitions, and confused sentence structure. But the presence of a very few of these errors should not lead the teacher to regard an essay as a failure if the writer has expressed himself clearly and logically and has adequately developed a central idea.

For the teacher's use in evaluating an essay on a five-point grading system, the Subcommittee suggests that Essay I in the scale might very well be considered an *A*, Essay II a *B*, Essay III a high *C*, Essay IV a low *C*, Essay V a *D*, and Essay VI definitely an *F* paper. In his evaluation of essays the teacher will find it impossible to avoid subjective judgments, but despite this problem, he should remember always that he is grading composition; he is not grading the student's family background, interests, or personality.

Every student writer, the Subcommittee believes, should be encouraged by appropriate marks and comments, but a student who does not write well should not be told that his accomplishment is creditable when it does not compare favorably with the acceptable essays in the scale.

SECTION V

THE EVALUATION OF ESSAYS

I. Content: Is the conception clear, accurate, and complete?

A. Does the student discuss the subject intelligently?

1. Does he seem to have an adequate knowledge of his subject?
2. Does he avoid errors in logic?

B. Does the essay offer evidence in support of generalization?

II. Organization: Is the method of presentation clear, effective, and interesting?

A. Is it possible to state clearly the central idea of the essay?

B. Is the central idea of the paper as a whole sufficiently developed through the use of details and examples?

C. Are the individual paragraphs sufficiently developed?

D. Are all the ideas of the essay relevant?

E. Are the ideas developed in logical order?

1. Are the paragraphs placed in natural and logical sequence within the whole?
2. Are the sentences placed in natural and logical sequence within the paragraphs?

F. Are the transitions adequate?

G. Are ideas given the emphasis required by their importance?

H. Is the point of view consistent and appropriate?

III. Style and Mechanics: Does the essay observe standards of style and mechanics generally accepted by educated writers?

A. Are the sentences clear, idiomatic, and grammatically correct? (For example, are they reasonably free of fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, faulty parallel structure, mixed constructions, dangling modifiers, and errors of agreement, case, and verb forms?)

B. Is the sentence structure effective?

1. Is there appropriate variety in sentence structure?
2. Are uses of subordination and coordination appropriate?

C. Is conventional punctuation followed?

D. Is the spelling generally correct?

E. Is the vocabulary accurate, judicious, and sufficiently varied?

SECTION VI

SYMBOLS USED IN MARKING THE ESSAYS

agr	agreement
cap	capitals
cs	comma splice
d	diction
fc	faulty comparison
frag	fragment
gr	grammar
mm	misplaced modifier
o	remove punctuation (usually comma)
pl	plural
pv	point of view
pred	predication
p	punctuation
red	redundant
ref	reference
rep	repetitious
sp	spelling
str	sentence structure
t	tense
trans	transition (needed)
x	obvious error
// str	parallelism
^	insert word
⁀	make one word

SECTION VII

THE ESSAY SCALE

ESSAY I

CAN IT!

(1) "Swinus Americanus" is a name [often] applied to those ignorant campers and travelers who find it easier to leave their refuse for someone else to pick up rather than dispose of it properly themselves. (2) A lack of outdoor manners is one of the primary reasons why people unconsciously destroy the natural beauty of our great out-of-doors. (3) The sum of money spent each year by local, state, and federal agencies to keep America clean is almost unimaginable. (4) In Yellowstone Park, one of our largest tourist attractions, [it costs the U. S. government] over two million dollars a year to keep the roads and campgrounds free from trash and refuse.

(5) After the turn of the century, many prominent organizations, such as the Izaak Walton legue, realized the need of educating the element which disregarded all ethics of good

camping. (6) Apparently, little progress was made, and the situation grew worse and worse. (7) In 1950 most of our highways and campgrounds looked like one huge trash dump. (8) Reform was long overdue. (9) Up sprang a number of campaigns which stressed the importance of good outdoor manners. (10) The Keep America Beautiful Campaign was organized, and "litterbug" became a household word. (11) Municipal and state governments [joined the parade] by enacting laws which imposed heavy fines for careless motorists who littered highways and byways. (12) Magazines and newspapers carried articles and pictures of this shameful aspect of American life. (13) Little by little, the people grew aware of their responsibility of preserving what belonged to them. (14) "Preserving" is an accurate word [if one realizes] that campgrounds strewn with garbage and litter are excellent breeding places for disease-bearing insects. (15) A piece of broken glass may magnify the sun's rays just enough to kindle a fire which may envelop thousands and thousands of acres of valuable watershed.

(16) Co-operation with this clean-up campaign has been overwhelming. (17) The manufactures of canned and bottled

beverages are experimenting with disposable paper or cardboard containers. (18) Gas stations have volunteered to dispose of refuse-filled paper sacks which motorists carry on their outings and replace this with a new sack. (19) In many parks, refuse cans bear the insignia of an imaginary kangaroo called Parky. (20) ["Parky says–"] is another familiar antilitterbug slogan. (21) Gradually, through posters, pamphlets, articles, signboards, and emphatic speeches, Americans have learned a valuable lesson in good manners. (22) The fight, however, must continue. (23) Not until our roadsides, campgrounds, and parks appear as they did before the advent of ["swinus Americanus"] will the fight be won. (24) By adhering to good outdoor manners, we will help to win this fight.

ESSAY I–CRITICAL COMMENT

Though far from perfect, this essay is of sufficiently high caliber to illustrate the top of the scale. Its principal merits are its brisk, lively, well-cadenced style and its excellent use of concrete illustrative language. For example, in sentences 4 and 5 a less-accomplished writer would have stopped at the comparatively vague "many prominent organizations" without adding the reference to the Izaak Walton League. (I) The essay is clear in conception and execution. (II) The organization of ideas is logical and coherent, proceeding from a general introductory statement of the importance of the problem to an analysis of steps taken and to be taken to improve the situation. Generally, the sequence of statements is clear and natural, although there are some lapses: sentences 14 and 15, for example, are not perfectly integrated into the paragraph. The whole paper has unity and

completeness. It presents the central idea that although many natural beauty spots are being destroyed by careless campers, a concentrated campaign is making definite progress toward educating the public in outdoor manners. This idea is developed through such examples as the Izaak Walton League, The Keep America Beautiful Campaign, and cooperation of the gas stations. The paper is well rounded off by the last three sentences, which are conclusive without being repetitious. (III) Sentence structure is not always accurate (the first sentence confuses idioms of comparison; the syntax of sentence 14 is meaningless), but it is usually correct and effective: sentences 5 to 13 show a good and meaningful variety of constructions rhetorically effective. The only grammatical error of any seriousness is the agreement error of *this* in sentence 18.

★ ★ ★

Essays in the first level of the scale are usually characterized by lively intelligence: the writer's thought flows easily from one idea to another; it grasps and expresses relationships among ideas and between abstract ideas and concrete realities. Sentence structure is usually both fluent and complex, vocabulary is extensive, and spelling is good. Such essays characteristically have excellent content, are frequently rather long, and have fully developed paragraphs. These qualities seem natural to a good mind. A young person's mind, however, may be somewhat undisciplined; thus the usual faults of essays in this range are in vocabulary, which, being ambitious, is sometimes experimental, and in organization and sentence structure, which may occasionally become a trifle confused. The quality of punctuation seems to vary considerably among the best papers.

ESSAY II

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

(1) What are the real causes of juvenile delinquency? (2) Who is to blame for the misdemeanors of today's teenagers? (3) A few weeks ago, as one of a number of students representing the various high schools in Sonoma County, I was brought face to face with this problem of juvenile

delinquency. (4) At the invitation of the County Probation Department, we attended a session of Juvenile Court and visited the County Jail and Juvenile Hall. (5) We had all been aware of the problem of criminal activities among minors, but after the tour, and especially after lengthy discussions with the supervisor of Juvenile Hall and with Mr. Becklund, County Probation Officer, we began to realize the full scope and gravity of the situation.

(6) Why, we asked, is juvenile delinquency such a problem? (7) Who is to blame? (8) "Parents," was the answer every time. (9) The teenagers we saw in Juvenile Court and in Juvenile Hall were there for many reasons, to be sure. (10) But all these stemmed from the same source—parents. (11) With some, it was lack of proper parental supervision; with some, a lack of one or both parents; and with others, neglect, disinterest, or depravity on the part of the parents. (12) There were, as in every case, a few exceptions to this generalization. (13) What about those offenders whose excuse was rebellion against conformity, against the standardized social laws in general, we asked? (14) The answer? (15) Couldn't this feeling of revolt be curbed, overcome by the offender's parents?

ref d
ref/ref
d
"juvenile" (to prevent ambiguity)
meaning? f. t. "have been"

(16) The prevention of juvenile delinquency is not an easy task to undertake. (17) We saw how much the city, county, state, and even nation [were doing to help] unfortunate minors overcome their problems and lead new, useful lives. (18) But the boarding homes, the camps, the schools for corrections are [not helping] to prevent delinquency. (19) The campaign must begin in the home. (20) The full significance of the parental role must be realized.

(17) Needs developing

contradictory?

Preferably omitted

weak concluding sentence?

empty rhetoric

ESSAY II—CRITICAL COMMENT

This is a moderately good essay with a clear thesis—that parents are to blame for juvenile delinquency—and an ostensibly good source of information; its principal fault is underdevelopment. (I) Though the discussion is intelligent, it lacks sufficient evidence to be convincing. (II) The organization of the essay is good in outline: there is a natural sequence of paragraphs setting up first, the problem and the authority for its answer; second, the answer itself; and third, a general proposal for solving the problem. But in detail the organization is weak: the final clause of the first paragraph ("we began to realize the full scope and gravity of the situation") is completely out of place in this strong rhetorical position, since the idea it contains is never developed in the essay. Sentence 11 should be further supported by details if it is to be really meaningful. In sentence 17 what "we saw" has never been revealed to the reader. The last sentence of the essay is very weak and points to the basic shortcoming of the essay: lack of full development. We want to know exactly what the parents can and should do and exactly how their actions can help solve the problem of delinquency. The whole essay would be improved by the use of concrete illustration. (III) The sentence structure, on the whole, is good (sentence 5, for example, shows the ability to handle a long, complex structure with fluency), but sentences 10 to 15 are something of a muddle. Imprecise pronoun reference leads to the confusing predication of sentence 10 (Can *reasons*—if *these* means reasons—"stem from parents"?) Otherwise most matters of style and mechanics are well handled—there are no errors at all in spelling and no serious errors of punctuation.

★ ★ ★

What has been said of essays in the first level applies generally to those in the second except in degree. The same flow of thought is to be expected, but it flows less easily. The vocabulary is good but less extensive. Organization and mechanics are usually competently handled. Overall style is mature but with less polish and imagination than in a first-level essay.

It is not unusual in a second-level paper to find in one particular area serious lapses which lower the general quality; for example, it may have excellent content and style but rather poor punctuation.

ESSAY III

MY FAVORITE SUBJECT

(1) In my four years at high school almost all of my subjects have interested me. (2) But the subject I like the most and which interests me the most is history.

(3) Before I was a junior I didn't like history at all. (4) I hoped never to have anything to do with it. (5) But when I became a junior I had to take United States History as a requirement for graduation. (6) I groaned at the thought of history.

subordinate (8) to (7) (7) The first few weeks of the course were miserable because I kept telling myself that I didn't like history. (8) My dislike for the course showed in my first quarter's grade. (9) But as the term progressed I [grew] very interested in "became" the subject. (10) The main reason for my growing to like

the course was my teacher. (11) She had a way of getting points across as well as making the course interesting.

(12) I liked the teacher so much and I became so interested in history that when I was a low senior I decided to take a course in California History. (13) The same teacher taught this course. (14) This course, since it dealt with the discovery and development of our state, proved to be even more interesting than the one in United States History.

awkward repetition

logic of (14)? further explanation needed

(15) Now as a high senior I am furthering my study of history by taking Modern History. (16) I only regret that I didn't take this course for a full year instead of just [a] half a year.

unnecessary

(17) When I go to college this fall I hope to continue [on] in the field of history because there is still so much to learn. (18) The further study of history will lead me to one day becoming a history teacher.

unnecessary

ESSAY III—CRITICAL COMMENT

There is nothing very good about this paper; on the other hand, there is nothing very bad about it. It is adequate and nothing more. (I) The idea of the essay is clear: "I like history." But it is far from complete: one wants to know what it is in the study itself that attracts the writer, but one never finds out. (II) The organization is mediocre. The introductory paragraph is too short and too bare; it might well suggest the ideas of sentences 3, 10, and 18. The sequence of ideas is rather mechanically chronological, though logical and without irrelevancies. But the statements are not sufficiently developed;

just one well-chosen illustration would probably have gone far to fill in some of the gaps of thought and to breathe some life into this torpid and unimaginative paper. The concluding paragraph should be better integrated with the rest of the essay. (III) The paper is free of grammatical and mechanical errors, though the sentences—like the ideas—tend to be somewhat over simple and structurally monotonous. In the second paragraph, for example, every clause uses the *I*-plus-verb construction: *I was, I didn't like, I hoped, I became, I had,* and *I groaned.*

★ ★ ★

The most common general characteristic of essays in the third level seems to be simplicity of both thought and expression. The subject is handled with competence but without distinction; the paragraphs are often short and lack full development; there is a tendency to write in generalizations without tying them down to particulars. The organization is usually logical but mechanical, and transitions are sometimes a problem. Sentence structure and vocabulary are both usually quite simple, reflecting the quality of the content. The style is wooden.

As a consequence of this general simplicity, few problems of punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure arise; hence few mistakes are made in these areas.

Sometimes an essay will be assigned to the third level by a balancing of good qualities and bad—when, for example, the organization is very poor, but everything else is good.

ESSAY IV

RURAL LIFE

(1) Life on a farm is full of excitment, hard work, and sp
enjoyment. (2) It takes long hours and hard work to keep a
farm in good condition. (3) One has to be a horse doctor,
d weather bureau, crop expert, and many things all at once ^"other"
to be able to handle all the problems that come up on the

farm. (4) One also has to be able to take dissappointments, sp
sp discouragement, and dispair.

(5) An average day on a dairy farm usually goes like
red/d or sp this: up at 4 or 5 A.M. in the morning, a good hardy break-
fast, and to work. (6) The cattle are brought in from } ||ath
pasture, milked, and put out again; all the equpment has to sp
be washed and put away, and the milk stored in a clean,
cool place until it is picked up. (7) The milk is then taken
relevancy of (7)? to a milk company to be made into butter, cheese, and so d
on. (8) Then comes the plowing or harvesting, depending d
on what time of year it is. (9) This goes on till lunch and
t continued after until it's time for milking again. (10) After
milking is done, it is supper time. (11) When supper is
over, social life begins. (12) Life in the evening is pretty comma preferable
d/incomplete comparison much the same as anywhere, only there is a longer distance i "else," p
to get to town or where ever there is to go. (13) There is sp unity of (12) and (13)
always something to do on a farm. (14) Sometimes in wait- (14) frag and ||ate
ing for a calf or colt to be born or maybe a prize bull has
× pneumonia and the ~~X~~ ep has been delayed. (15) Idle time (15) weak passive
is rarely found on a farm.

trans i to what? (16) There are many advantages. (17) Some are in see-

ing animals grow and turn into prize stock and seeing fields } develop
green and healthy.

wrong number P/s "that" (18) Disadvantages are one never knows if the ensuing } develop
year will bring success or failure.

ESSAY IV–CRITICAL COMMENT

This essay is somewhat less than adequate, but not without merit. (I) The writer's knowledge of the subject is not in doubt, but not enough of that knowledge is demonstrated. (II) The essay is very unbalanced; the last two "paragraphs" especially are underdeveloped. The second paragraph is better because it includes more details; but it suffers from the illogical sequence of ideas in its last four sentences. The opening sentence of the same paragraph is awkward because of the seemingly gratuitous introduction of *dairy* as a qualifier: surely this restriction should be made in the introduction or brought in as an example. Finally, the two subjects of the second paragraph—a typical day on a farm and the general busyness of farm life—are not well integrated. (III) There are numerous errors of style and mechanics: the faulty parallelism of sentences 3, 5, and 14; the many errors in spelling; the sloppy structure of sentences 12 and 14. Some sentences, however, are well put together (sentence 6, for example), the whole presentation generally is commendably concrete, and the colloquial style provides authenticity and liveliness appropriate to the subject.

★ ★ ★

Essays in the fourth level tend to show little competence with mechanics; errors of spelling and punctuation appear frequently as well as serious lapses of grammar and sentence structure. These papers are sometimes over simple, and very typically they show a lack of sustaining power: they begin well with fully developed ideas and accurate sentences, but when the thought begins to fail, the paragraphs become shorter, and the organization and the sentence structure deteriorate. Jerkiness in the thought sequence and a stilted style are common. Such papers not infrequently have flashes of excellence amidst generally poor writing.

ESSAY V

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

(1) One of the chief causes for juvenile delinquency is not having anything to do. (2) If they had a lot of good places to go & good things to do, then I don't think there would be as much as there is now. (3) In the big cities, the streets are full of big stores and factories, but if they had plenty of recreation halls, [then that would be one thing the teenagers could do.] (4) People should also encourage the teenagers to take part in sports and other activities–some place they would feel needed. (5) When there is only one movie or show in town and no recreation hall, then there is [nothing] to do. (6) Teenagers like to keep doing different things. (7) If they keep doing the same thing all the time, then they soon grow tired of it and start looking for something else to do. (8) They don't care whether it's bad or not, all they care about is doing something. (9) Teenagers are very restless people.

(10) Sometimes, in some cases, the parents are at fault. (11) They don't teach their children right from wrong.

(12) They should start when the child is very young and teach them, then they wouldn't want to do anything wrong. (13) Parents should also bring their children up in church. (14) It has been proven that children that have been raised in church, [accompanied by their parents,] grow up with a feeling of security and they are very good teenagers. (15) Those kind of teenagers do have something to do—they have all kinds of church activities to participate in.

(16) I think that if parents wants their children to be good, then they should take them, & go themselves, to church.

ESSAY V—CRITICAL COMMENT

This is a poor essay, inadequate in almost every respect. (I) It is not devoid of content, but it is full of unsupported generalizations, at least one of which (sentence 14) is manifestly not true. The idea with which the student begins the essay—that teenagers do not have enough to do—is abandoned at the end of the first paragraph and vaguely reintroduced at the end of the second paragraph, only to be abandoned once more at the end of the paper. (II) There is little unity to the essay and no overall organization; it reads as though the writer were thinking aloud. He wanders aimlessly from a consideration of recreation facilities through an indictment of parents to a final recommendation that everyone go to church. The last paragraph has the tone of a summary conclusion, but in fact it summarizes only the last half of the second paragraph. Very unbalanced, the essay gives no indication of the relative importance of the ideas suggested: more space is devoted to the first idea than to the others, but the rhetorical emphasis is on the last idea. (III) There are a great many gross errors of grammar and sentence structure: the agreement errors of sentences 12 and 16, for example, the faulty apposition of sentence 4, and the pronoun reference errors of sentences 2, 3, and 12. The sentence structure in general is oversimple and repetitious; particularly noticeable is the repeated *then*-clause construction.

★ ★ ★

Essays in this level typically have numerous gross errors of sentence structure and punctuation. Vocabulary is weak and inaccurate; diction is usually poor. Confusion and formlessness are most characteristic of the poorer essays: sense of structure is lacking; thought is muddled and disorganized. Hence, illogical constructions, meaningless statements, garbled syntax, and fragmentary sentences are common.

ESSAY VI

CHIEF CAUSES OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

str/ap (1) The causes for the juvenile delinquence are not the str: what'
x/ap,pl parents or the public & official think. (2) It is the kids d
agr/ref themselves and public who causes this.
d (3) There isn't enough for a kid to grow up with, nothing meaning?
agr/d to do. (4) There are a lot of school activity for one to get
into. (5) But the ones who are in them are not the one who agr/agr
agr/ap are the delinquence. (6) Most of the juvenile delinquence ap
are the boys or girls who are not very popular in school
and are not in school activity. (7) They may attend school
pl/p game, but they won't sit in the chearing section or yell to sp
sp support there school team. (8) They sit off to the side and
gr yet they want to be notice. (9) They won't go out for
idiom:-s sport to get attention because they know they won't be
gr good enough. (10) They heads are bigger than the other kids. fc

(11) For attention they go out and paint the town red. (12) By steeling hub cab off cars or get into gang fights. (13) This way they can go back to school and tell all about how they destroy property.

(14) I live in a small town and we are not bother very much with this problem. (15) You mostly fine this in your big cities like New York or Los Angeles.

(16) Maybe in a since I am wrong [about there is nothing to do.] maybe there is to much to do. (17) In a big city you can fine a lot of thing to do.

(18) Also in comparing a small town kids with a big city, you will fine that all the kids in small town will know each other or just about every body in the hole town. (19) But in a big city how many kids will you know. (20) Just the ones in your littie group. (21) There are to many kids around to get to know them all, and you don't have time to because you are going to the show with someone or you have to stay home and take care of your little sister.

(22) I think the ways to cut down on this is to put up recreation centers and have the kid take part in sports and other curriqular activities.

d/red (23) Also if we can regress back to the years when our/(23)/frag
agr/p parent were kids. (24) we would fine that there parents, sp/sp/p
p/sp our grandparents, did not take the responsiblity [of] there "for"/sp
agr kids. (25) The kid themselves were responsible for there sp
own action.

agr (26) That mean the kid could be sent to jail for what
agr they have done [and not the parents.] not clear

(27) So let the teenager have his own responsiblity and sp/p
sp there will be less juvenile deliquency.

ESSAY VI—CRITICAL COMMENT

This essay represents the bottom of the scale (but is not necessarily the worst submitted). Reference to the evaluation outline will readily show that not a single question there can be answered affirmatively of this paper. The writer has almost no command of grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary, and paragraph development. The ideas are random and confused; there is virtually no organization.

★ ★ ★

Papers in the lowest level show a fundamental inability to manipulate meaningfully the structures and vocabulary of the language and show an equally fundamental ignorance of the conventions of standard English.

SECTION VIII

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It has already been observed that "average" high school writing does not represent satisfactory achievement as measured by college entrance examinations. The question naturally arises then of what can be done to improve writing performance. The most important answer, the Subcommittee believes (and probably most teachers and administrators would agree), lies in improving the classroom situation. No teacher, however accomplished, can hope for any great success when he must teach as many as two hundred students in a semester; he simply does not have enough time. Therefore, whenever possible, an attempt should be made to limit the teaching load. The Subcommittee feels that one hundred students is probably a maximum for effective teaching. It is also desirable, whenever possible, that students be sectioned according to ability, for a wide range of native capabilities in one classroom can only compound the instructor's difficulties. Finally, the teacher himself should, self-evidently, have a thorough grasp of his own subject matter.

These recommendations are obvious and concern administrative problems all too familiar to those who have continually to face them; not infrequently the solution to such problems lies outside the strictly academic area. At the pedagogical level itself, the following suggestions might well be worth the teacher's consideration.

1. The maintenance of conservative (but not excessively rigid) standards of style seems very desirable for both theoretical and practical reasons. A reasonable command of basic linguistic resources is essential for any effective communication: the student should be familiar with the structural elements of English and know how to manipulate them. He needs, too, a familiarity with standards of style expected in formal prose. As a matter of discipline, he should not be encouraged to depart from such standards. He will, moreover, acquire a greater feeling of security and confidence if he has clear and specific goals to work towards. It is true, of course, that many aspects of English usage are in dispute, but these seldom involve matters of real significance; the student can take them in stride if he has learned what is important and essential and what is not.

2. Since there is probably a definite relation between accurate thinking and clear writing, the teacher should, the Subcommittee feels, insist on careful thought as a preliminary to composition. The student should be en-

couraged to think his topic out thoroughly, weighing possible arguments and opinions, deciding on their relative importance, and determining the logical sequence of their presentation. These matters should be worked out before he begins the actual writing of his paper; preliminary class discussion of a topic is usually very useful in helping the student organize his ideas coherently.

To express his ideas, to communicate them clearly, the student should be encouraged to use as specific and concrete language as possible, avoiding diction which is vague, empty, or needlessly abstract. He should always be aware of the basic predication of each sentence he writes.

3. The Subcommittee believes—and has found much agreement among teachers—that one step toward solving the problem of too large composition classes is that of assigning shorter papers. Nearly all the principles of good composition can be learned from the writing of paragraphs or short 150 to 200-word essays, which may also allow the teacher time to correct them more thoroughly and more usefully for the student than do long papers. The student will also learn much from revising his own papers in light of his teacher's corrections and suggestions. As he improves and his papers require less time to correct, longer essays can be assigned.

4. Finally, the Subcommittee is convinced that the responsibility for improving student competence in writing should be shared by teachers in all fields; it need not be the exclusive province of English teachers. Clear and accurate communication is, after all, essential in all areas of study, and its importance and usefuness extend far beyond the school. Therefore, all who are concerned with the young person's development should help and encourage him to achieve such goals. In every class, students should be asked to organize their writing, to spell correctly, and to avoid gross illiteracies, just as in English class students should be expected to avoid, for instance, gross misstatements of historical or scientific facts. Cooperative effort by all secondary teachers will increase the knowledge and skills of all secondary students.